

## **Self Image in Ordinary Mind Zen**

To study the way is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.

To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barrier between self and others.

This statement, a classic Buddhist quote from Dogen Zenji, founder of the Soto School of Japanese Zen, represents my understanding of the essence of transpersonal psychology. In traditional psychology, as well as in the lay view, we tend to emphasize the importance of self, and our concept of self, in human functioning. Transpersonal psychologists consider the possibility that we can also come to view our self as something greater than, or transcendent to, our normal conception of "self." From the perspective of transpersonal psychology we could also consider how we might perceive the world and function in it if we transcended our identification with our self concept.

I would like to invite you to explore one approach to the nature and function of self through the view of Zen meditation practice as taught in the Ordinary Mind School of Zen. This approach emphasizes the examination and experience of core beliefs and self image as the foundation of meditation practice. Charlotte Joko Beck (1989, 1993), resident teacher at the Zen Center of San Diego, founded the Ordinary Mind Zen perspective. Following training with several Japanese Zen masters, she received authorization as a Zen teacher in the early 1980s. As a psychologist who has studied self concept since 1971 and as a Zen student of Joko Beck since 1983, I have explored these issues. I must emphasize, however, that I am not certified as a teacher in the Ordinary Mind school, so I can only speak as a student, and from my own experience. Today I would like to discuss some aspects of the major Ordinary Mind approach to Zen practice as they bear on the sense of self.

Joko (1996a) describes the self in terms of core beliefs, an image or idol (McWilliams, 1993) that we have of ourselves.

My self-centered anger arises when my image of myself is threatened. So: what image of yourself do you hold? “I am a kind person.” “I am a good parent.” “I accomplish worthwhile things.” “I am an authority on (science, plants, cooking, diet, dogs . . . whatever).” Or my image can be the opposite. “I am a mean person.” “I am a mediocre parent.” “I never accomplish anything.” On and on. Our images are deeply rooted. We love them. They run our lives. They are who we think we are.

Some psychological therapies attempt to replace a negative image with a positive one. Effective but only to a point. Our attachment to *any* image, positive or negative—since we will defend our idol—leaves us in the long run in a state of slavery; the idol rules our existence and we are helpless under its domination.

Any defended image invariably blocks the open awareness from which effective action springs. And the image “I am the one who sees clearly, who has realization, who is enlightened” is itself the barrier to true seeing. Being “enlightened” is being without image; undefended and open to life as it is. It is being able to feel the pain of the desperately defended images of others. It is, of course, compassion. (Beck, 1996a. p. 1)

This view differs from some popular perspectives on meditation that focus on attaining special states of consciousness. It emphasizes, instead, awareness of how we respond to ordinary daily life experience, and it supports the view of the Dalai Lama, who says, “The very purpose of meditation is to discipline the mind and reduce afflictive

emotions” (Woodward, 1999, p. 34). Although Joko articulates her viewpoint in simple language and emphasizes ordinary daily living as the context for Zen practice, her perspective grows out of the insights of classic Zen teaching.

***Hsin-Hsin-Ming.*** A teaching called the *hsin-hsin ming*, or “Verses on the Faith Mind,” attributed to Sengstan, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chinese Zen patriarch, helps to articulate this perspective:

The Great Way (of spiritual awareness) is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinions for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. . . . The Way is perfect like vast space, where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess. Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things. . . . Do not search for the truth. Only cease to cherish opinions. (Kornfield, 1996, p. 143-145)

The *hsin-hsin-ming* reinforces the intimate relationship between events and our thoughts, and it points to the fundamental challenge we face because of our discriminating mind. Because we view the world through the lens of self-centered desires, we have a strong view of what should occur to meet the requirements of our self-image. This creates suffering and dissatisfaction, because, holding no allegiance to our constructs, events often fail to correspond to our desires. Additionally, we fail to experience the actual events as they unfold, weakening our ability to learn from experience.

**The Four Practice Principles.** Joko (1993) reformulated the Four Noble Truths which provide the foundation of the basic teachings of the original Buddha, and the principles underlying the vows taken in traditional Japanese Zen Practice. These four principles succinctly summarize the preceding points.

Caught in the self-centered dream, only suffering.

Holding to self-centered thoughts, exactly the dream.

Each moment, life as it is, the only teacher.

Being just this moment, compassion's way. (Beck, 1993, p. 275)

We create dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and suffering by separating ourselves from the experience of the moment because we remain in a self-centered world of our own creation. We hold to that view by focusing on seeking what we want, avoiding what we don't want, and ignoring everything irrelevant to our desires. "Life as it is" refers to the right-here-now, the actual events as they unfold. To the extent that we can embrace these events, regardless of whether they suit us, we can learn from experience. The insights of the Faith Mind teachings point to the "perfect" nature of reality. When we fully experience the moment independent of our desires, we perceive more clearly and can serve the world and others effectively.

**Ordinary Mind Zen Practice.** We have considered the essential concepts of the Ordinary Mind Zen view of self, the relationship between self and experience, and how attachment to self image may impede effectiveness in relating to the world.

Understanding the concepts alone, however, does not really benefit us. A regular, disciplined practice provides the opportunity to gain freedom from the constraints of

identities, and their associated opinions and strategies. Joko (1999) articulates the essence of Zen practice:

What we have to do in spiritual practice is pay attention to this very moment, the totality of what is happening right now. And the reason we don't want to pay attention is because it's not always pleasant. It doesn't suit us.

We constantly dream about the future, about the nice things we're going to have, or that are going to happen to us. So we filter anything happening in the present through all that: "I don't like that. I don't have to listen to that." This goes on constantly: spinning, spinning, spinning, always trying to create life in a way that will be pleasant, that will make us feel safe and secure, so that we 'feel good.'

But when we do that we never see this right-here-now, this very moment. We can't see it because we're filtering what it says. And when we do that, this moment is clouded over. Just ask any ten people who(hear this). You'll find they all tell you something different. They'll forget the parts that don't quite catch them; they'll pick up something else, and they'll even block out the parts they don't like. Even when they go to a spiritual teacher they hear only what they want to hear. Being open to a teacher means not just hearing what you want to hear, but hearing the whole thing. And the teacher is not there simply to be nice to you.

So the crux of meditation is this: we must constantly create a little shift from the spinning world we've got in our heads to right-here-now. That's our practice. The intensity and ability to be right-here-now is what we have to

develop. We have to be able to develop the ability to say, “No, I won’t spin off here”—to make that choice. Moment by moment, our practice is like a choice, a fork in the road: we can go this way, we can go that way. It’s always a choice, moment by moment, between the nice world that we want to set up in our heads and what really is. . . . Zen training is designed to enable us to live comfortable, beneficial lives. But the only people who live comfortably are those who learn not to dream their lives away, and instead to be with what’s right-here-now, no matter what it is: good, bad, nice, not nice, having a headache, being ill, being happy. It doesn’t make any difference. Did you think it did? (Beck, 1999, p. 1)

The essence of Ordinary Mind Zen meditation practice thus lies in the willingness to accept and experience life “as it is” regardless of whether it meets our expectations, desires, or convenience. If we manifest the right-here-now awareness that Joko describes, we would act freshly to the experience of the moment. For most of us, however, right-here-now awareness remains a continuing challenge and requires a disciplined methodology like Zen practice.

Joko views such practice as a life-long activity. “Our practice is about our life, and we practice forever” (Beck, 1996, p. 1). She regularly emphasizes that, while most people experience some immediate effects, the benefits begin to manifest more fully after about twenty years of disciplined daily practice, regular intensive practice retreats, and working directly with a capable teacher. Additionally, Zen practice focuses on the conduct of daily life as well as the specific activities involved in formal sitting meditation. When students ask her “How is my practice going?” Joko responds, “How is your life going?”

Regular daily sitting forms the fundamental base of Zen practice. The proper physical form of formal sitting meditation provides an essential foundation of an effective practice. Whether sitting cross-legged on a cushion or on a chair, the body should feel balanced and at ease, erect but not stiff. Regular practice requires daily sitting, not missing more than one day per week. Sitting practice provides a formal time to develop awareness of the two basic elements of life experience: present bodily sensations and mental process and thoughts. Clarity, calmness, or insight may occur during sitting, but they do not represent its goal; rather the process should focus on observing and attending to the reality of the moment, including confusion, discouragement, anxiety, etc.

Three interrelated techniques support the practice: 1) focusing or concentrating, 2) labeling thoughts and experiencing bodily sensations, and 3) attending to emotional reactivity (Zen Center of San Diego, 1999). While students of Ordinary Mind Zen practice typically begin with the first, move to the second, and later to the third, experienced students may choose among them depending on differing conditions.

Focusing or concentrating provides a ground for practice. “Often such a practice is required at the beginning of a sitting to settle our speedy monkey mind” (Zen Center of San Diego, 1999, p. 1). By focusing on a specific stimulus, concentration practice enables us to quiet the mind and develop stable sitting. It might consist of attending to the in-and-out movement of the breath, or counting each breath from one to ten and then starting at one again. As the mind wanders away from the breath, attention gently returns to the practice. Concentration practice by itself, however, tends to shut out life experience, instead of opening ourselves to it, so while serving as an important step in practice this technique alone has limitations.

As focusing or concentrating helps to settle sitting, we can then move to “wide open awareness,” observing thoughts as they continuously arise and fall away while attending to the variety of bodily sensations. To a great extent this mode of practice forms the core of everyday sitting and daily life awareness. In the beginning of practice, and typically the beginning of a sitting period, after concentration enables the mind to slow down, we may become aware of the constant flow of thoughts that arise, and we begin to see recurrent patterns and themes in these thoughts. We do not have to “do anything” about these thoughts; rather we may take the position of a witness or observer to the thoughts. We may benefit from labeling or categorizing the type of thoughts as they arise, which assists us in seeing their recurrent nature. Although thoughts continue to arise, after time we begin to see them from a more distant perspective, and they lose their sense of importance or urgency. At some point we may find that we become bored with the repetitive nature of these self-centered thoughts, and we begin to lose interest in many of our cherished opinions and ideas.

As we slowly decrease interest in thoughts, we may become more acutely aware of bodily sensations, particularly noticing areas of the body where we tend to hold tension (e.g., stomach, shoulders, neck, etc.). Again, rather than trying to change or relax these sensations, Ordinary Mind Zen practice directs awareness towards them, allowing ourselves to fully experience the sensations. In doing so, we may experience change in the quality of the sensations and the tension.

The third aspect of practice emphasizes attending to emotional reactions to experiences and events, and the thoughts that create the emotional reactivity. By recognizing that we create the emotion through attachment to a self-centered belief, we

can observe the emotion-thought spiral. We see that emotional sensations lead to thoughts which, due to our attachment to the thoughts, generate more sensations of physical tension. In attending to emotions and thoughts, and examining what we gain from holding to the beliefs, we understand more fully our core beliefs or requirements and the patterns or strategies we have developed to avoid awareness of them. This third aspect of practice consists of attending to the total experience of our distress, particularly in terms of the physical, bodily sensations, so that we can see directly how the core beliefs reside in the body itself.

A description of the methods does not convey the extent of the challenge of actual practice. Resistance, turbulence, and emotional upset may follow an initial “honeymoon” period. Meditators often experience fatigue, boredom, and leg pain. These experiences provide more opportunity to gain awareness of thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. Joko (1996) cautions against avoiding sitting during times of emotional upset and notes the particular value of sitting when difficulties arise. Further, she suggests that once a week we should sit 10-15 minutes longer than we wish to as a way of enhancing reactivity. As Joko states:

What we learn from having to sit quietly with that discomfort is so valuable that if it didn't exist, it should. When you're in pain, you can't spin off. You have to stay with it. There's no place to go. So pain can be really valuable. (Beck, 1999, p. 1)

Although consciously creating discomfort and pain may seem unusual, we can recognize the value of devising circumstances that enhance awareness of self images and how they function in our lives. Greater awareness of self images, even in a context that

does not focus on changing them, may generate negative emotional responses. Activities that enhance awareness of self image can lead to feelings of threat, guilt, and anxiety, and can engender defensive actions and resistance, in an attempt to avoid that awareness. As psychologist George Kelly (1955) put it, when awareness leads to a new view of the self, or a clearer view of the actual current self, the individual “. . . can be threatened by a new ‘realization’ of what he has been doing. He can be threatened by the mounting propositions of an alternative interpretation of himself” (p. 493), even if this alternative interpretation might ultimately prove more useful.

Ordinary Mind Zen practice can help us to learn more about self images and attachments to them, develop greater awareness of the thoughts and the bodily sensations that accompany these self-images, and experience directly the pure physical sensations of core constructs, independently of the verbal commentary (Beck, 1996a). By developing greater experiential awareness of our self images, along with a more detached perspective toward them, we may have the opportunity to maximize our effectiveness in relating to the world, and to find the peace and fulfillment most of us seek. While never reaching a conclusion, and perhaps requiring many years of discipline, persistence, patience, and ruthless self-examination, practices directed at enhancing awareness of core beliefs may help us to gain some measure of freedom from the potential tyranny of the self-centered images that can run our lives.